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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives

Empowerment of rural women: the role of gender-responsive governance and institutions

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report examines the contributions of gender-responsive governance and institutions to rural women's empowerment. The report concludes with recommendations for consideration by the Commission on the Status of Women.

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I. Introduction

1. At its fifty-sixth session, the Commission on the Status of Women will consider as its priority theme "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges". The present report examines the extent to which gender-responsive governance and institutions respond to women's capacities and needs in rural areas and promote their empowerment. The economic empowerment of rural women is addressed in a separate report of the Secretary-General on the priority theme (E/CN.6/2012/3). Both reports are to serve as inputs for the Commission's consideration of the priority theme and should be read together (see also document E/CN.6/2012/10).

2. This report, which responds to Economic and Social Council resolution 2006/9, incorporates an analysis of contributions by Member States[1] and draws on information and data from United Nations entities[2] and other sources, as indicated. It concludes with recommendations for future action for the consideration of the Commission.

II. Governance and institutional structures

3. Rural women's and men's lives and the roles they play are multidimensional and dynamic, and are impacted by policies, institutions and rules as well as the gender relations institutionalized in households, communities and society at large. The extent to which women and men have access to institutions, and the extent to which these institutions serve rural populations can determine whether women's livelihoods are sustainable and improve their well-being. Formal institutions include ministries, parliament and local councils. The empowerment of rural women is affected by policies made and services delivered by a number of line ministries, including the ministries of agricultural and rural development, infrastructure, public utilities, energy, finance, education and health. Farmers' organizations, cooperatives and women's organizations, as well as community-based institutions such as water-use groups and self-help groups, cater to rural women. However, women are underrepresented in many of these organizations as members and in key decision-making roles, and their priorities and needs are often inadequately addressed.

4. Gender-responsive governance structures are essential to ensuring that rural women's agency and rights are central to all stages of policymaking, including design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. While there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach, development initiatives in recent years have emphasized the importance of strengthening accountability and transparency of gender-responsive governance.

[1] Contributions were received from the Governments of Cameroon, Colombia, Denmark, Djibouti, Estonia, Fiji, Finland, Germany, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Mauritius, New Zealand, Serbia, South Africa, the Sudan, Sweden, Switzerland, the Syrian Arab Republic, Timor-Leste and Ukraine.

[2] The following United Nations entities provided inputs: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC); Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA); Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD); International Labour Office (ILO); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women); and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

5. For the purpose of this report, three groups of actors have been identified in the context of gender-responsive governance structures:[3] the government, service providers and citizens. Within the government, politicians and policymakers are the main agents involved in the policymaking process. Service providers include both the management within public institutions that are mandated to implement policies and oversee service delivery (such as ministries) and the service delivery personnel. While many services are still being delivered by the public sector, the private sector and non-governmental organizations have increasingly assumed the role of service providers in recent decades. Citizens are both the beneficiaries of the services delivered and the constituency holding policymakers and politicians accountable.

6. Interactions among these actors underline the three major governance processes: policymaking, public administration and service delivery. During the policymaking process, legal and policy frameworks are developed, with citizens exerting their influence, usually through civil society organizations. Legal and policy frameworks are implemented by the relevant public administration which should be inclusive and responsive to citizens. In the service delivery process, the actual services are delivered by frontline service personnel from the public sector, private providers or the non-governmental organizations. Finally, based on the services received or on needs identified owing to lack of service provisions, citizens and civil society can exercise their rights to hold the government and providers accountable.[4]

7. Clearly, the relationships established among actors are not gender-neutral. Women are frequently disadvantaged and marginalized in their participation and contributions to these three processes owing to prevailing gender stereotypes.[5] Major entry points for fostering gender-responsive governance encompass women's participation in politics and policymaking, including in the design and delivery of public services, women's leadership in civil society organizations, gender-responsive policy design and implementation, and women's influence over service providers through exertion of client power and choice.[6]

8. It is important to bear in mind that this governance model is embedded within a larger global context. Governments, at all levels, are held accountable for the international and regional normative and policy frameworks to which they have committed. Key global legal and policy frameworks on rural women's rights include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women[7] and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995).[8]

[3] World Bank, *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People* (Washington, D.C., 2003).

[4] Ibid., United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), *Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability: Progress of the World's Women 2008/2009* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.08.III.E.1).

[5] Leah Horowitz, "Getting good government for women: a literature review", Agriculture and Rural Development Discussion Paper, No. 43 (Washington, D.C., 2009).

[6] *Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability*.

[7] United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 1249, No. 20378.

[8] *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II.

III. The role of national and local governments

9. Gender-responsive policymaking addresses the challenges faced by women in rural areas, including unequal access to key productive assets and services such as land and financial services, as well as the lack of recognition of their diverse roles in agriculture and off-farm activities (see also E/CN.6/2012/3). It is equally important to review, amend or abolish existing laws and regulations that discriminate against women. Failure to do so runs the risk of further creating and reinforcing gender biases and patterns of exclusion.

National government

10. To ensure gender-responsive policy processes, Member States have taken various approaches, including the gender mainstreaming strategy, use of gender-specific provisions in legal and policy instruments, and special measures and programmes targeting rural women. These efforts have put different levels of emphasis on addressing the needs of rural women, with some specifically targeting rural women and others merely including rural women as one of several beneficiary categories.

11. Many countries reported efforts to mainstream a gender perspective into national policies that could impact rural women. For example, New Zealand takes a whole-of-government approach to gender mainstreaming for all national policies including rural development and agricultural policies.

12. Some Member States use legal frameworks for gender equality to regulate all policymaking activities undertaken by public authorities. Denmark's Gender Equality Act of 2000 obliges public authorities to take equality into account in all public planning and activities. The preparation and implementation of the Rural Development Programme for Mainland Finland 2007-2013 are regulated by the gender-equality requirements contained in the Act on Equality between Women and Men. In Estonia, the Ministry of Agriculture is required to develop and implement rural and agricultural policies in compliance with the generally applicable legal framework of gender equality when developing eligibility criteria for programmes and resource allocation.

13. In many countries, gender mainstreaming efforts are led by national machineries for gender equality. In Timor-Leste, the participation of the Office of the Secretary of State for the Promotion of Equality in working groups is aimed at mainstreaming a gender perspective into the National Priority on Rural Development of 2009 and 2011, and the National Priority on Food Security of 2010. Since 2010, the Office has conducted gender analyses of key ministries' annual action plans and budgets and has provided comments to the office of the Prime Minister before the plans are sent to the Ministry of Finance and Parliament for approval. In Mauritius, the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare has set up a National Committee on Gender Mainstreaming to ensure that gender issues are mainstreamed in all policies and programmes of line ministries including the Ministry of Agro-Industry and Food Security.

14. Countries have also developed provisions targeting rural women in various policy instruments including agricultural and rural development policies, national development strategies, national action plans on gender equality, and sectoral gender policies. For example, the Rural Area Programme for Sweden 2007-2013 requires

that the promotion of gender equality must be reflected in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all rural and regional development programmes. In Italy, the National Strategic Plan for Rural Development includes an instrument aimed at providing women farm managers with the opportunity to carry out joint business activities across various farm sectors such as production, processing and marketing. In Japan, the Third Basic Plan for Gender Equality (2010) includes the promotion of gender equality in agricultural, forestry and fisheries communities among its priorities. Colombia adopted a specific law (No. 731/2002) on the improvement of the status of rural women in the country.

15. Many countries reported special programmes and projects targeting rural women. For example, the Ministry of the Empowerment of Women and Family of Cameroon provided funds to poor women through the Ministry's Centres for the Empowerment of Women. Some countries (Denmark, Fiji and Mauritius) established facilities, such as women's centres and market booths in rural areas, for business support and entrepreneurial development. Others (Fiji, Italy, Japan, Kenya and Timor-Leste) continue to provide rural women with various opportunities for training and participation in workshops whose goal is to enhance women's skills, including through training in entrepreneurial and business skills, leadership skills, and technical and agricultural skills. United Nations entities including UNDP and UNESCO have also assisted in the provision of training activities to rural women.

16. Some national policies do not contain special provisions or measures targeted at rural women; instead, they are included as beneficiaries within other groups. For example, Fiji's Road Map for Democracy and Sustainable Socio-Economic Development 2009-2014 and the Women's Plan of Action for 2010-2019 lay out a broad range of strategies and actions designed to empower all women, including rural women. The Strategy Paper for Growth and Employment is Cameroon's tool for implementing the national vision for development for 2010-2020. It provides guidance on promoting equality between women and men in seven sectors, including infrastructure, the rural sector, industries and services.

17. While it is essential that legal and policy frameworks respond to women's needs, it is equally important to ensure that the process of implementation of these policies leads to concrete changes in women's lives. Although many countries have national gender policies that guide the implementation of the gender-equality agenda, there remains the challenge of aligning sectoral policies and budgeting processes with gender policies. However, little information is available on concrete implementation and outcomes.

18. Rural women, including indigenous women, remain underrepresented in national parliaments and within public administration owing to lack of education; insufficient leadership skills; the traditional exclusion of women from decision-making forums; and structural disadvantages and inequities, stemming, inter alia, from class, caste and ethnic differences. In addition, women may be constrained by restricted mobility, inability to attend meetings held at inconvenient times or locations, lack of transport, security concerns, and childcare and other caregiving responsibilities.[9]

[9] Catherine Hill, "Enabling rural women's economic empowerment: institutions, opportunities and participation" (EGM/RW/2011/BP.1), background paper prepared for the Expert Group Meeting on Enabling Rural Women's Economic Empowerment: Institutions, Opportunities and Participation, Accra, 20-23 September 2011.

19. A number of measures can be taken to strengthen women's participation in policymaking processes, in both elected and appointed positions. Quotas and other temporary special measures have played an important role in increasing both the number of women in political life and their contributions thereto. Quotas can be implemented through constitutions and laws and are also applied by political parties on a voluntary basis. In the public sector, quota provisions vary in the legislative and executive branch. The Constitution of Kenya requires at least one third of positions on policymaking committees to be reserved for both women and men. The preparation of Finland's Rural Development Programme required official working bodies to have a minimum of 40 per cent of both women and men.

Local government and decentralization

20. By virtue of their closer relationship with people, local governments play a key role in promoting greater equality and building inclusive societies. It is increasingly expected that local governments will provide people, especially the most marginalized groups, with the opportunity to participate more actively in public life, and they thus hold out the promise that policies and service provision can be made more responsive to the needs of rural women and men.[10] However, local governments cannot be assumed to be inherently more effective, or interested, in advancing gender equality, as male-dominated norms and values prevail also at local levels.[11]

21. In recent decades, decentralization reforms have been promoted as a means of deepening democracy and improving development through the transfer of functions, resources, and varying degrees of political and fiscal autonomy to local governments and other subnational entities.[12] Decentralization is inherently a political process that shifts power and authority and is thus likely to face resistance from national-level agencies when fiscal and human resources are transferred to local governments. When decentralization of political power is not accompanied by necessary devolution of fiscal and administrative resources to local governments, it creates the "unfunded mandates" problem, where local governments are left vulnerable in the face of multiplying responsibilities and diminishing resources.[13] In other cases, decentralization is often accompanied by cutbacks in central government allocations to local authorities. As local governments must recover their own costs, they often do so through service fees and user charges, which can be potentially redistributive and have a negative impact on poor people including women.[14]

[10] World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and International Fund for Agricultural Development, *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook* (Washington, D.C., 2008); Prabha Khosla and Bernhard Barth, *Gender in Local Government: A Sourcebook for Trainers* (Nairobi, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), 2008).

[11] Khosla and Barth, *Gender in Local Government*.

[12] Outcome document of the Conference on Decentralization, Local Power and Women's Rights, organized by the International Development Research Centre (Canada) and other partners, Mexico City, 18-21 November 2008.

[13] *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*.

[14] Jo Beall, "Decentralization, women's rights and development" (London, London School of Economics and Political Science, Development Studies Institute, 21 March 2007).

22. To make decentralization a truly empowering process for women, measures need to be taken to integrate a gender perspective into all local policies, planning and budgeting processes, as well as into the political and administrative functions of local governments. For example, in Serbia, the draft strategy for the improved economic status of rural women in the autonomous province of Vojvodina 2012 is being developed by the Provincial Secretariat for Labour, Employment and Gender Equality with assistance from the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women). The process includes mapping and adapting existing programmes for the economic empowerment of rural women.

23. It is equally important to strengthen the technical and administrative capacity of local authorities to empower rural women. Local governments need administrative and organizational competence and human and financial resources to fulfil the diverse expectations of women and men with respect to local services including security, access to justice, public services, political participation and economic well-being. Local councillors and officials need to develop gender expertise and capacity, especially in key local administration units such as planning, budgeting and service delivery. There need to be established meaningful consultation mechanisms for gathering information from women in a wide range of situations at the community level on their gender-specific needs and interests.[15] For example, since the commencement of Ghana's decentralization process in the early 1990s, efforts have been made to enhance local governments' attention to women's priorities in development processes, including through the establishment of gender focal points within local governments.[16]

24. The level of women's participation as elected officials in local government remains low owing to historical and institutional barriers, women's lack of access to informal networks, and cultural norms and prejudices directed against women. However, without strong participation of women at the local level, the gains made at the national level cannot be sustained in the long run.[17] A number of countries use quota systems at the local level to strengthen women's participation. Serbia's Law on Local Elections requires that at least 30 per cent of candidates in local self-administration elections belong to the underrepresented gender. In India, a 30 per cent quota has been established at the panchayat level. South Africa established a quota system for women's participation in rural traditional leadership ranks. Timor-Leste introduced a quota at the village level in 2010, requiring that two out of five village council members be women.

Mechanisms and tools

25. Effective use of gender-responsive mechanisms and tools can help ensure the integration of a gender perspective throughout the policy process. In Finland, for example, separate gender analyses were conducted, in the preparation of the Rural Development Programme, to assess the capacities and needs of rural women and

[15] Helen O'Connell, "Preserve status quo or promote gender equality?", "Capacity.ORG", No. 40 (August 2010). Available from http://capacity.org/capacity/export/sites/capacity/documents/journal-pdfs/CAP1001_40_ENG_LR.pdf.

[16] Esther Ofei-Aboagye, "Promoting gender sensitivity in local governance in Ghana", *Development in Practice*, vol. 14, No. 6 (November 2004).

[17] Beall, "Decentralization, women's rights and development".

men in order to formulate gender-responsive strategies and measures. Timor-Leste introduced a number of measures in line ministries, including gender assessments, to increase gender awareness and reflect the needs and priorities of rural women in the sectors of agriculture and fisheries, health, education, and vocational training and employment.

26. Gender-responsive budgeting, which can be an important tool for the agricultural sector, is a process that encompasses conducting gender analysis of budgets, identifying gender-equality gaps in policies and budgets, and monitoring and evaluating the financial resources allocated for the implementation of government commitments on gender equality. The emphasis on monitoring and accountability fosters an enabling environment for ensuring adequate resource allocation for the achievement of gender-equality goals, including provision of services in rural areas.[18]

27. In 2009, the Gender Centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the support of UN-Women, conducted a gender analysis of the agriculture sector with the goal of integrating gender-responsive budgeting into agriculture and rural development strategies. The findings and recommendations of the gender analysis were utilized in the work of the Gender-Responsive Budgeting Working Group for the period of 2010-2013. The gender-responsive budgeting action plan for 2011 requires the Ministry of Agriculture in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to conduct gender analysis in the context of the Law on Agriculture and the medium-term development strategy and its implementation plan.

28. Capacity development within Governments remains a widely used strategy for promoting rural women's empowerment. To strengthen the capacity of line ministries in promoting gender equality, a number of countries such as Japan, Kenya, the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic have put in place gender officers and/or gender units within line ministries. In the Sudan, the Gender Mainstreaming in Agriculture Development Unit within the Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for supporting and promoting economic development opportunities for rural women. In the Syrian Arab Republic, the Directorate for the Development of Rural Women is in charge of implementing the strategy for rural development of the Ministry of Agriculture, with the goal of involving rural women in policy implementation and follow-up of programmes.

29. Member States and United Nations entities have also made efforts to develop capacity within the context of gender-equality issues through training and workshops. Training opportunities can target women and men in their role as elected officials, civil servants and service providers. For example, the Gender Equality Office of Serbia organizes training sessions for civil servants on basic gender issues and gender-responsive budgeting. The UNESCO project on "training needs of women in the panchayat villages" in India aims at providing locally elected female representatives with information on their rights. In Tajikistan, UNFPA works to build capacities on gender-equality issues for actors including civil servants, service delivery personnel, legal service providers, policymakers and religious leaders.

[18] *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2009: Women's Control over Economic Resources and Access to Financial Resources, including Microfinance* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.09.IV.7).

30. Networks of government institutions and other stakeholders can also contribute to the formulation of relevant strategies and programmes for rural women. In this regard, the National Observatory for Female Enterprise and Labour in Agriculture of Italy consists of representatives from a range of ministries, professional agricultural organizations, regions and autonomous provinces, and research and statistical offices. In Liberia, the National Gender Forum brings together gender focal points of all line ministries to enhance their capacity in gender mainstreaming and analysis.[19]

31. Accountability as a core element of good governance, entails monitoring of performance in policymaking, implementation and service delivery, and imposition of corrective action or remedies in case of performance failure, as well as assessment of the adequacy of government performance. In the context of a gender-responsive accountability system, the decisions of public authorities need to be assessed against the needs and interests of women and men equally. For instance, gender-equality performance reviews have been integrated into a number of institutional innovations, such as participatory municipal budgeting in several Latin American countries and citizen participation in the Federal Electoral Institute of Mexico.[20]

32. Developing an enabling policy environment and effective gender-responsive policies requires developing and strengthening knowledge and skills among different stakeholders, including civil servants and service providers, so as to ensure the generation, analysis and use of the comparable gender-sensitive indicators and sex-, age- and rural/urban disaggregated data needed to inform policy development, as well as monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation.

33. Fiji undertakes a periodic national survey on rural women's participation in agriculture. The Fourth National Agriculture Census, which is the most recent, collected and analysed sex-disaggregated data in rural areas. In 2009, Timor-Leste established an Inter-Ministerial Commission for Rural Development to monitor the gender-responsive implementation of the Strategic Framework for Rural Development 2010-2020. In Kenya, line ministries collaborate with the national machinery for gender equality on the collection of sex-disaggregated data.

34. United Nations entities such as FAO, ECLAC and ESCWA have also taken measures to advance the collection of comparable sex-disaggregated data and gender indicators. For example, FAO has worked for a number of years on developing the institutional capacity of central statistics offices in several countries to improve the design and collection of sex-disaggregated agricultural and rural employment data. It has also developed the Agri-Gender Statistics Toolkit for the production of sex-disaggregated agricultural data. The FAO Gender and Land Rights Database collects country-level information on gender inequalities embedded in issues related to land rights. ECLAC has collected data on women in non-remunerated activities, disaggregated by rural and urban areas, in 17 countries. It also collects sex-disaggregated data, including economic participation, employment and poverty indicators, in order to monitor the situation of women in rural areas.

[19] Contribution of UN-Women.

[20] *Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability.*

IV. Service delivery

35. The delivery of better services to women is key for the achievement of economic and social development, in particular of the Millennium Development Goals. Accessible quality services that address women's needs and priorities are necessary in order for women to be able to enjoy their rights including the right to health, to education and to decent work. Services, including transportation, water, sanitation and energy, that are well-designed can address the challenges that rural women face and reduce and ease the unpaid care work (see also document E/CN.6/2012/3) that rural women typically perform.[21] Evidence shows that the improvement of service design and delivery processes to increase transparency, participation and accountability benefits not only women but a range of other users.[22]

36. Rural women continue to face challenges in accessing public services, including structural failures in service provision, Governments' bias towards urban areas, and lack of access to registration and formal identification. In addition, rural women tend not to engage with service delivery mechanisms in a decision-making capacity owing to a lack of information and agency. They have fewer opportunities for informing service providers of their needs and for organizing themselves in order to demand better services and social accountability.[23]

37. Owing to the triple challenges of structural failures, by State, market and community, services are often not provided to the extent needed in rural areas, thereby jeopardizing the livelihoods of the rural poor, including women.[24] The State often fails to ensure adequate provision of public services to rural citizens owing to limited budgeting powers of local governments in rural areas, as well as to the higher costs associated with extending services to isolated or remote areas. Service delivery through alternative providers, including the private sector, public-private partnerships and civil society organizations, has faced similar difficulties in terms of balancing concerns of funding, quality standards and reach. Moreover, national policies governing service delivery tend to be designed in line with the priorities and needs of urban rather than rural areas. The difficulties associated with basic service delivery in developing countries are further exacerbated by limited financial resources, poor maintenance of the service infrastructure, and lack of clarity in respect of the separation of functions across governments at different levels as a result of decentralization reform.[25]

38. In most countries, a prerequisite for accessing basic services is securing a formal identification card through civil registration. However, such a process can be a very difficult one for marginalized populations, especially women in rural and remote areas. In this regard, research of UN-Women shows that the proportion of

[21] *Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability*; Annika Allman and others, "Making public services work for women: lessons from UN Public Service Award nominees" (June 2011).

[22] Allman and others, "Making public services for women".

[23] UN-Women, "Gender and democratic governance programme document: delivering basic services to women in fragile contexts" (New York, 2010).

[24] World Bank and International Food Policy Research Institute, *Gender and Governance in Rural Services: Insights from India, Ghana and Ethiopia* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2010).

[25] Harold Lockwood and Stef Smits, *Supporting Rural Water Supply: Moving Towards A Service Delivery Approach* (Rugby, Warwickshire, United Kingdom, Practical Action Publishing for IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre and Aguaconsult, 2011).

women without identification cards can be as high as 80 per cent in some villages in rural Egypt, which hampers their access to health, education, pensions, applications for property titles or deeds, and other social services, in addition to their ability to vote.[26]

39. Public services often fail to respond to the needs and challenges of rural women. In many parts of the world, women are constrained by physical distances, poor transport infrastructure, concerns for physical safety, and cultural norms that limit women's mobility or discourage women from entering the public sphere.[27] In situations of domestic violence, for example, a lack of available childcare or employment opportunities can exacerbate women's lack of access to basic support services (police protection, safe accommodation, health care and legal assistance), which further compounds their psychosocial isolation. Services that do not take these gender-specific factors into account often fail to reach women recipients. Moreover, biases in public spending towards men's priorities and needs further exacerbate the situation. Despite the important roles that women play in agriculture, the perception bias that "women are not farmers" persists, which makes it even more challenging to provide much-needed services to rural women.[28]

40. Member States and United Nations entities have taken measures to improve service delivery to rural women, with some focusing on the improvement of infrastructure and basic services. For example, Kenya reported to have improved distribution of piped water and enhanced rural electrification. In Djibouti, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, with the support of the Arab League, initiated a number of projects to reduce women's vulnerability due to limited water supply. To enhance women's access to services, UN-Women supported the Government of Moldova in establishing joint information and services bureaux, which bring key public, private and civil society organizations' service providers to one physical location on a regular basis. They also undertake joint mobile visits to remote villages.

41. Improving service delivery can also be achieved through strengthening the accountability of governance. In the governance process, service recipients can hold delivery personnel accountable both through the short route of exercising client power and choice of service providers and through the longer route of influencing the policymaking process on service provision. However, the choice of service providers is sometimes not an option for rural women, especially when their purchasing power is limited.[29] To ensure gender-responsive service delivery, women's participation and voice should be taken into account in the design delivery, and accountability processes of public services. Women should be engaged proactively during the process through consultations and dialogues with women's groups, increased women's presence among frontline service delivery personnel,

[26] UN-Women, "Strengthening women's voices for gender-responsive services in fragile contexts" (New York, 2011); data provided by the Ministry of the Interior of Egypt in October 2011.

[27] *Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability*; UN-Women, "United Nations Public Service Award Forum Workshop: Leading Innovations in Gender-responsive Service Delivery, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 21-22 June, 2011" (New York, 2011); Allman and others, "Making public services work for women".

[28] *Gender and Governance in Rural Services*; "United Nations Public Service Award Forum Workshop: Leading innovations in gender-responsive service delivery"; *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*.

[29] Horowitz, "Getting good government for women".

and facilitation of rural women's ability to organize themselves and to hold service providers accountable. Additional measures could include providing incentives to reward gender-responsive performance and imposing sanctions for neglect of women's needs,[30] building capacity of frontline service delivery personnel on gender-equality issues, raising awareness among rural populations on women's rights and entitlements, and developing gender-sensitive indicators for monitoring gender-responsive service delivery.[31]

42. Governments should play a central role in providing essential services, either directly or in partnerships with the private sector and non-governmental organizations. Thus, adequate public spending is essential to the quality delivery of these services. However, financing for rural services faces multiple challenges. Costs of these services are typically raised through taxes, user fees and intergovernmental transfers. Although user fees for accessing services are levied in many parts of the world, such fees can limit the access of the poor and lead to lower levels of usage by vulnerable and marginalized populations. Consequently, public services that are essential to rural development and people's livelihoods should be funded through higher levels of government, including provincial and central governments.[32]

43. Establishing well-functioning social protection schemes that are sustainable in the long run serves as a good case in point in this regard. Social protection provides cushions to the vulnerable population and enables people to better overcome poverty and social exclusion in times of financial turmoil and difficulty. However, social protection in most developing countries has been largely confined to those employed in the formal sector.[33] As many rural women work as temporary, family, casual or seasonal workers, extension of public social protection schemes to the workers in the informal sector can bridge some of the gender gaps in rural areas.[34]

44. Recent years have witnessed a growing recognition that the design of social protection should be gender-responsive and that social protection should be extended to all in a coherent and coordinated manner. A minimum social protection floor comprises a basic set of social rights, services and facilities that every person should be able to enjoy, including universal access to essential health care and minimum income security.[35] National Governments should play a leading role in the development of relevant institutions, such as social protection sector coordinating agencies. Policies and legislation need to be developed to ensure accountability, especially regarding the rights and entitlements of people as well as responsibilities and eligibility criteria for accessing guaranteed benefits. Moreover, several studies have attested to the affordability of a minimum social protection floor and have discussed potential avenues for financing such as expenditure reallocation and tax reform and utilization of international development resources.[36]

[30] *Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability*.

[31] Ibid.

[32] OECD, *OECD Rural Policy Reviews: Strategies to Improve Rural Service Delivery* (Paris, 2010).

[33] *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*.

[34] *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*.

[35] See www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/spfag/index.htm.

[36] International Labour Organization, *Social Protection Floor for a Fair and Exclusive Globalization* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2011).

45. Significant progress has been made towards the implementation of social protection floor in many developing countries. This process has moved faster in middle-income countries, benefiting millions of people including rural women. For example, there is the India Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (NREGA), providing for a programme that guarantees 100 days of work to rural households that want to undertake unskilled manual work, with 33 per cent of all workdays reserved for women workers.[37] Incorporated into the Constitution in 2005,[38] the programme is financed by central and provincial governments and implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development together with actors at State and local levels.[39]

46. Better access to information and technologies is also important for the empowerment of rural women and can be achieved through engaging women farmers in research, development and extension work. To be truly gender-responsive, scientific institutions and researchers must work closely with the target user population for the development and deployment of technology. Agricultural research and extension institutions also need to involve women proactively, for example, by increasing the number of women agricultural extension agents and gender-sensitive male agricultural extension agents. Current data show that only 5 per cent of agricultural extension services are addressed to rural women and that less than 15 per cent of the world's extension agents are women.[40] UNDP has worked in Togo to enhance women's representation among extension officers. UN-Women is supporting the Ministry of Agriculture of Rwanda in transforming its provision of agricultural extension services.

V. The role of rural institutions

47. Rural institutions that represent farmers and entrepreneurs in rural areas include a wide range of farmers' and producers' organizations, cooperatives, women's groups and other membership-based organizations, as well as public, private and mixed service providers such as extension services, trade associations and microfinance organizations.

Farmers' and producers' organizations

48. Farmers' and rural producers' organizations are independent non-governmental membership-based rural organizations of self-employed smallholders and family farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fishers, landless people, small entrepreneurs and indigenous peoples. They have mixed memberships of women and men, but there are also women-only organizations. They range from formal groups covered by

[37] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development and International Labour Office, *Gender Dimensions of Agricultural and Rural Employment: Differentiated Pathways Out of Poverty — Status, Trends and Gaps* (Rome, 2010).

[38] United Nations Development Programme, "Employment guarantee policies; Policy brief: gender equality and poverty reduction", No. 2 (April 2010).

[39] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *The State of Food and Agriculture: Women in Agriculture — Closing the Gender Gap for Development* (Rome, 2011); *Social Protection Floor for a Fair Globalization*. See also NREGA website (http://nrega.nic.in/).

[40] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "FAO Gender and Development Plan of Action (2002-2007)" (Rome, 2003).

national legislation, such as cooperatives and national farmers unions, to self-help groups and associations.[41] By organizing, farmers can strengthen their political voice through advocacy, achieve economies of scale, and gain access to more market opportunities through increased bargaining power.

49. While women may make up 30-50 per cent of the membership of farmers' organizations, they are generally underrepresented in leadership positions, with underrepresentation increasing as one moves from the local to the provincial, national and international levels. For example, in the Asian Farmers' Association, 9 out of 10 national member organizations have mixed membership, but none of them are led by a woman.[42] Some mixed organizations have a dedicated women's branch which can serve as a platform for negotiation by women within the organization as well as with external partners.

50. The organizational culture and rules of procedure within formal organizations can contribute to the marginalization of women. Making institutions gender-sensitive, through improving working methods and institutional cultures and tackling gender stereotypes, can increase their ability to address gender-equality issues in legislative and policy development.

51. A number of good practices exist to strengthen the role and voice of women in farmers' organizations. Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN), in cooperation with IFAD, has piloted the Rural Women's Leadership Program in the Philippines and Nepal to provide support to women leaders and increase the responsiveness of national policies, programmes and institutions to the needs of rural women producers and workers. PAKISAMA, a national confederation of 28 mixed farmers' organizations in the Philippines, launched a series of gender-sensitivity seminars among women and men leaders at the local, regional and national levels. The combined strategy of awareness-raising and leadership training contributed to the formation and strengthening of the women committees within member organizations. Gender and anti-sexual harassment policies and guidelines were adopted with a view to mainstreaming a gender perspective in the work of farmers' organizations. An affirmative action policy stipulates that women should have a representation of at least 30 per cent in all project activities.

52. In the context of the biennial Farmers' Forum in 2010, IFAD sponsored a special session on promoting women's leadership in farmers' and rural producers' organizations. The participants agreed on a number of strategies for strengthening women leaders' participation in national and global policy processes and in consultations with donors and other aid organizations, including a minimum quota of 30 per cent (to reach 50 per cent over time) in all projects and programmes that work with farmers' organizations, and the provision of financial resources to increase the capacity of farmers' organizations to address gender issues.

[41] "SARD and farmers' organizations", Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) Policy Brief, No. 12 (2007).

[42] Esther Penunia, "The role of farmers' organizations in empowering and promoting the leadership of rural women" (EGM/RW/2011/EP.12), expert paper prepared for the Expert Group Meeting on Enabling Rural Women's Economic Empowerment: Institutions, Opportunities and Participation, Accra, 20-23 September 2011.

Cooperatives

53. Cooperatives are membership-based organizations and enterprises in which individuals pool resources in order to meet economic, social and environmental goals such as poverty reduction, productive employment and the empowerment of women. The membership feature of cooperatives has the potential to empower the poor through community self-reliance, collaboration and cohesion. Cooperatives are estimated to have 1 billion individual members worldwide,[43] account for more than 100 million jobs (according to 2009 statistics) and market 50 per cent of global agricultural output.[44]

54. They play a key role in supporting agriculture and rural development by marketing agricultural products and improving farmers' access to markets in areas where the private sector is weak or unable to meet the needs of farmers for credit or inputs.[45] Some agricultural cooperatives are using the fair trade approach as a tool for widening markets and ensuring farmers' incomes in view of growing global competition and volatility in food prices.[46] More recently, agricultural cooperatives have become more involved in agricultural financing. In some countries, such as Ghana, Egypt and Kenya, agricultural cooperatives are diversifying their activities by moving into the areas of savings and credit provision. Some financial cooperatives, such as Sistema de Crédito Cooperativo (Sicredi) in Brazil, also offer health insurance products, thereby reducing members' vulnerability to the increase in health costs and economic shocks.[47]

55. Agricultural cooperatives have the potential to promote rural women's economic empowerment, including through their uniting to overcome restrictions in pursuing commercial or economic activities. They benefit substantially from pooling resources and sharing information and knowledge. Women-only cooperatives in South Asia, for example, facilitate economic independence and improve the social standing of women through their active participation in businesses and exposure to management experience and other training. In Djibouti, there has been an increasing organization of women farmers into cooperatives in recent years. The Ministry of Agriculture has provided support to agro-farming cooperatives (there are about 25 cooperatives, involving nearly 5,000 women). Participation in management committees allows them to gradually participate in the process of decision-making in their region. The Timor-Leste Ministry of Economy and Development, with the support of ILO and IrishAid, provided technical and financial support to women cooperatives in a range of activities including handicrafts, horticulture and coffee production.

56. Nonetheless, the overall level of participation of women in agricultural cooperatives remains low owing to a lack of resources and information as well as cultural constraints. In agricultural cooperatives in many Asian countries, women account for only 2-10.5 per cent of total membership.[48] In an effort to enhance

[43] See www.ica.coop.

[44] "Cooperatives and rural employment", ILO COOP Fact sheet, No. 1 (2007).

[45] See documents A/64/132 and Corr.1; and A/66/136.

[46] See United Nations, "The cooperative advantage", "DESA News", vol. 11, No. 11 (November 2007).

[47] A/64/132.

[48] Ibid.

women's leadership in rural cooperatives, Japan adjusted the criteria for the appointment of female board members.

Women's organizations

57. In many countries, rural women's organizations play an important role in advocating for rural women's interests and participation in the development of rural policies and programmes. Finland's Rural Women's Advisory Organization represents rural women's interests in the Rural Policy Committee, the network of rural development actors, and participates in the Monitoring Committee of the Rural Development Programme. ETNA Estonia, an association of entrepreneurial rural women, represents rural women in the preparation and monitoring of Estonia's Rural Development Plan and provides support to capacity-building of entrepreneurial and employment skills. Germany's Association of Rural Women cooperates with the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth on various projects designed to enhance the working conditions of women and establish networks among women in rural areas. The Union of Swiss Women Farmers promotes awareness-raising on political issues and the Union of Rural Women of Ukraine is focused, inter alia, on securing access to justice.

58. In Kenya, rural women have organized watchdog groups[49] to address issues related to property and land rights such as lack of assistance by local officials and contradictory legal regimes. They identified key constraints women face within their communities; identified key stakeholders such as local administrations, the judiciary, the police and land dispute tribunals; documented violations of women's right to land; and engaged in dialogue with stakeholders which led to their participation in decision-making processes.

Financial institutions

59. Women's access to all financial services, including savings, insurance, remittance transfers and credit, is essential to their economic empowerment and livelihood. Rural financial services are provided by a range of institutions including commercial and State-owned banks, membership-based financial organizations (such as rural financial cooperatives and credit unions), microfinance institutions and integrated rural development programmes and multisector organizations.[50]

60. The variety of rural financial service providers discussed above exhibit vastly different levels of achievement with regard to women's empowerment. Some service providers mainly or exclusively target women, while others, especially the formal finance providers, demonstrate an insufficient involvement in provision of resources to women. In fact, women as an underserved group of financial service users constitute an underdeveloped and potentially profitable market to the financial sector. In order for rural finance providers to ensure that their systems fully meet the needs of women, it is imperative that a gender-responsive institutional culture be

[49] Grools Kenya, "Taking actions: grassroots women leading to curb asset stripping, property and land disinheritance" (1 July 2008).

[50] *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*.

developed, that incorporation of gender-responsiveness in all interactions with clients be ensured and that gender-sensitivity training to staff be provided.[51]

61. In recent years, efforts have been stepped up to address the failure of the formal financial system in serving the poor and disadvantaged, including women. One key response to the failure of the formal financial system has been the growth of microfinance services, which aim to provide financial services on a scale large enough to reduce poverty on a financially sustainable and even profitable basis. Those services encompass the continuum from "poverty lending", that is, donor-subsidized lending to the poor, to a "financial systems" approach which stresses financial sustainability.[52]

62. Microfinance, through a successful targeting of women, individually and in groups, has strengthened their livelihoods, helped develop entrepreneurial skills and enhanced their involvement in community governance. However, there is a growing recognition that microfinance is not the solution to all of the challenges faced by women. While considerable evidence indicates a positive impact on reducing income fluctuations, the growing pursuit of financial sustainability goals has led to the neglect of the extremely poor by a large proportion of microfinance organizations, which could disproportionately affect rural women.[53] In addition, over time many microfinance institutions have been transformed into commercial and regulated entities; and as a result, the proportion of women clients has declined and group-based lending has shifted to individual lending.[54]

Other community-based organizations

63. Self-help groups are voluntary associations that aim to solve common problems, such as those involving access to savings and lending. Group membership helps build solidarity and self-esteem and has the potential to empower women in their demands for economic and productive resources. It can also increase their experience in respect of issues involving decision-making and leadership. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a registered trade union of 800,000 women in India, aims to improve women's income and food security through full employment and to strengthen women's capacity to participate in policymaking bodies.

64. Water usage associations have been established in many countries in response to an increasing demand for water. The involvement of water users in the management and operation of irrigation schemes is critical to a more efficient performance of irrigation schemes and enhanced water governance. However, in many countries, women's participation in water associations is much lower than that of men owing to assumptions about women's role in irrigation, restrictions in membership to landowners and women's hesitation to participate in men-dominated organizations. Greater participation of women has been achieved in countries and areas where there has been greater recognition among the members of the population of women's roles, equal allocation of land or allowance for other forms

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*.

[54] Women's World Banking, "Stemming the tide of mission drift: microfinance transformations and the double bottom line", WWB focus note (New York, 2008).

of tenure besides ownership, institution of a quota for women's membership in water associations, and provision of training for women on income-generation activities.[55]

VI. Conclusion and recommendations

65. **In the context of the recent global crises, the role of agriculture and rural development has awakened renewed interest. The outcome document of the 2010 High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals[56] and the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020[57] committed to promoting the empowerment and participation of rural women as critical agents for enhancing agricultural and rural development and food security.**

66. **While an impressive body of legal and policy work has been established to address women's role as an agent of change in the rural economy and as a key producer of the world's food, significant implementation gaps persist. Rural women, including indigenous women, remain underrepresented in formal and informal rural institutions as elected officials, civil servants, service delivery personnel, or as members of farmers' and community-based organizations. Their knowledge, experiences and contributions are still not sufficiently taken into consideration in policy development, resource allocation and programmes in all areas of sustainable development.**

67. **Gender-responsive governance requires that all institutional actors integrate a gender perspective in policymaking, implementation and service delivery. Governments at national and local levels have a responsibility to promote livelihoods and empowerment of rural women, in particular through strengthening accountability mechanisms, providing sufficient financial and human resources, and ensuring the proper delivery of public services so as to benefit all rural women. Also needed is special attention to ensuring that the implementation of laws and policies is in compliance with gender-equality goals. It is equally important for the capacity of policymakers, civil servants and service providers, both female and male, to be developed so as to enable them to respond effectively to gender-equality issues.**

68. **Greater participation of women in institutions is a key element in ensuring institutions' responsiveness to women's priorities and needs; in the shaping of policies and programmes; and in determining the manner in which services are provided. Participatory approaches and stakeholder consultations are some of the means of ensuring women's input to policy development and the rules that govern service provision and their feedback in that regard. Through involvement in rural and women's organizations, women articulate their priorities and interests; demand information on public finances; and call for changes in policies and services.**

[55] *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*.

[56] See General Assembly resolution 65/1.

[57] *Report of the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, Istanbul, Turkey, 9-13 May 2011* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.11.II.A.1), chap. II.

(a) **With regard to the following areas, the Commission on the Status of Women may wish to call on Governments and other stakeholders to:**

Gender-responsive institutions

(a) **Integrate a gender perspective into all rural governance processes including policymaking, public administration and service delivery;**

(b) **Review, revise, amend or abolish laws and policies that discriminate against rural women;**

(c) **Ensure that strong gender units are in place at senior levels in line ministries, such as ministries of agriculture, and are supported by adequate budgets and the power to ensure that all policies and programmes are gender-sensitive and respond to the priorities and needs of rural women and men;**

(d) **Develop capacity of government officials and service providers to use available mechanisms and tools for the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of gender-sensitive policies, programmes and service delivery;**

(e) **Allocate adequate financial resources within line ministries and local governments to meet rural women's needs, including through applying gender-responsive budgeting and gender analysis in planning and budgeting processes;**

(f) **Develop outreach programmes to ensure that rural women are aware of their rights and the responsibilities of national and local governments, with a view to enabling rural women to hold all duty-bearers to account;**

(g) **Provide all rural women and men with free-of-charge access to personal identification documents (such as identity cards and social security numbers) so that they are recognized as full citizens with equal access to productive assets and services;**

(h) **Enact appropriate legislation and regulatory frameworks to ensure that rural organizations enjoy the right and freedom to operate independently, with particular incentives for rural women to organize themselves;**

Service delivery

(i) **Adopt the social protection floor approach with a gender perspective so as to provide basic social protection for all, and take measures to ensure long-term financial support for basic social protection services in rural areas;**

(j) **Create mechanisms designed to enable rural and women's organizations to hold public and private sector service providers accountable for the accessibility, quality and cost of services provided to women and men in rural areas;**

(k) **Increase the number of women extension agents and provide training on gender-equality issues to both male and female extension agents;**

Participation and leadership

(l) Ensure that rural women participate in key decision-making and budgetary allocation processes at all levels of government and within rural institutions;

(m) Adopt temporary special measures, including the setting of quotas, to improve women's participation in national and local governments, farmers' organizations and cooperatives;

(n) Create a fair and transparent process for the inclusion of women in leadership positions in rural farmers' and other organizations, including by setting concrete targets and timelines;

(o) Target women leaders in both women-only and mixed-membership farmers' organizations for participation in the planning and implementation of agricultural and rural policies and programmes, organize women-only consultations, and provide women-friendly logistics (such as the provision of day-care facilities);

(p) Support rural and women's groups in resource mobilization, advocacy and capacity development aimed at effective participatory processes at the local level;

(q) Encourage and support partnerships among different stakeholders in recognizing and responding comprehensively to the needs and priorities of rural women;

Data

(r) Strengthen the capacity of national statistical offices to systematically collect, analyse and disseminate comparable data disaggregated by sex, age and rural/urban areas, including those collected in household and labour-force surveys, agricultural censuses and population censuses, and develop gender-sensitive indicators to serve as the basis for gender-responsive policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation in rural areas.